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ABSTRACT

The meaning of a word often cannot be formulated by conscious rules, because it is unconscious. Evidence on the verb "break" demonstrates this. The consequence for teaching is that teachers cannot supply meanings in words, but should present a wide range of uses of a word, so that students can intuit the unconscious generalization. (Author)

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ON GENERALIZING MEANING

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When we teach a language, our goal is to provide as much general understanding as possible, so that the student is not forced to learn the language by memorizing every single fact. But what in fact are the generalities of the language, and how best can those generalities be taught? In dealing with these questions, we can make two different mistakes. We can misjudge the generalities of the language, missing some and creating some bogus ones. We can also, even if we have generalized correctly, attempt to teach generalities in such a way that students rarely grasp them.

More fundamentally, however, we can make both mistakes if we do not consider fully the implications of the fact that most of our knowledge, linguistic and otherwise, is unconscious knowledge. Most of our native language ability was acquired long before we could consciously reflect on what we were learning. We learned generalities of such great complexity that linguists still can not fully specify them, and we did it all unconsciously, without having to resort to conscious rules and procedures. Further, that unconscious knowledge proves to be more reliable than the knowledge we have gained by conscious means. Speaking ability is more reliable and easier to manifest than writing ability, which has been acquired with much more awareness. As teachers, we are aware that consciously formulated rules are very ineffective. Writing teachers drill students endlessly in grammar, with little improvement. Also, while we and the textbooks we use provide numerous rules for the student, we put our greatest pedagogic trust in constant repetition, drilling, making the student immerse himself in the details of the

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language so that his unconscious can do for him what it did when he learned his native language.

In fact, one of the reasons why second language learning is so difficult may be that there is too much conscious interference in the process. In his How Children Learn, John Holt describes such a situation. Attempting to solve a geometric puzzle by reasoning it out, he reaches the conscious conclusion that the puzzle is impossible. Yet children could solve it. Eventually he realizes his mistake:

> I had begun to reason too soon, before I had allowed myself enough "Messing About," before I had built a good enough mental model of the ways in which those pieces moved, before I had given myself enough time to explore all the possible ways in which they could move. The reason some of the children were able to do the puzzle was not that they did it blindly, but that they did not try to solve it by reason until they had found by experience what the pieces could do. (p. 171)

In both How Children Learn and How Children Fail, Holt describes the teaching failures that follow from premature generalizations, from not giving children enough concrete experience to draw the generalizations themselves. When they do draw generalizations themselves, it is solid unconscious knowledge which they do not forget; when they have only the teacher's conscious formulations to work with, they learn very little.

As academic people, we are prone to overvalue our rational abilities. We are aware that students must learn more than what we or the textbooks consciously teach them. We may even be aware that students learn things which neither we nor they can ever identify. Yet we may secretly hope for the utopian day when we understand a language so well that we can spell out everything for the student, providing him with all the conscious rules that he will ever need. But I think that hope betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of what language is. It assumes, contrary to what we know about human mentality, that a language is

completely rational, I think instead that our greatest problems in teaching arise because we attribute too much conscious generalization to the language. As my research in the syntax and semantics of English has gradually demonstrated to me, there are generalities in language that can not be comprehended by rules, that can only be understood unconsciously.

I will demonstrate my point by considering the question of how words should be defined. I want to emphasize a fact that we all know, but which is often forgotten in our teaching methods: that some words, primarily the most common words in a language, the words learned first by children, can not be defined by other words, but must be understood independently of other words. My research concerns the meaning of common English verbs such as break, take, give, go, come, and run. These words require many definitions in the dictionary, and also occur in a number of apparently inexplicable phrases which we call "idioms." Such words, and their correspondences in other languages, are given so many meanings that a dictionary is virtually useless. Admittedly, dictionaries have a number of basic limitations that inhibit generalization of meaning. However, when recent semantic research began to produce multiple meanings, I wondered if we were not fundamentally mistaken in our understanding of some words. Perhaps these words have general meanings that definitions obscure. It was hard for me to see what such meanings could be, because I was trying to figure them out, to formulate them, with other words. So I decided to do what Holt suggests: simply collect a voluminous number of sentences in which such words occur, and then see what I had. For the verb break, which I will now discuss, I have collected over 1800 sentences.

Our conscious understanding of the verb break is distorted because

we are never fully aware of all the data. We too quickly think of concrete senses, and tend to assume that these represent a basic meaning. Only later are we aware of some abstract senses, and the delay in our awareness, plus the apparent irregularity of abstract examples, leads us to conclude erroneously that these senses are derived, metaphorical extensions. Thinking too rationally, we impose the Concrete-Abstract and Literal-Metaphorical distinctions on the data, not noticing that all the common verbs in the language are independent of these distinctions. Our education betrays us; we find it inconceivable that the language could ignore such fundamental distinctions. But with break it does; and if we suspend our rational distinctions, we begin to see the powerful unconscious generalization that a verb like break represents.

There are two basic patterns with break, which I have labelled PRIMARY and SECONDARY on Table One. The nouns listed under PRIMARY are things which can break; these nouns occur either as an intransitive subject or a transitive object. I've included only those nouns whose designation can be adequately understood out of context. I have listed them with concrete senses first, abstract senses later; note that there is no sharp dividing line between concrete and abstract. Also, some nouns can be either concrete or abstract: string, grip, chain, line, tie, bond, barrier, shackles, and others. This pattern has a set of possible co-occurring words, as I list under PRIMARY CONTEXTS. The second pattern, SECONDARY, either does not mention the thing which is broken, or puts it into a prepositional phrase. as in The man broke through the barrier. The nouns which are listed can occur as intransitive subjects or transitive objects, but they designate what RESULTS from a breaking, such as hole, or something whose condition or existence is affected by the breaking; note the man in the man broke out of jail. The SECONDARY CONTEXTS are quite different from PRIMARY CONTEXTS;

even when they agree, they differ: note into in PRIMARY the window broke into pieces and SECONDARY the crooks broke into the house.

Many of the examples I have collected seemed unusual at first sight; in the fuller framework of all the examples they serve to demonstrate how many particular things the unconscious mind can conceive of as breaking, many more particulars in fact then the conscious mind could ever conceive of. Many of the examples would have been impossible to find merely by thinking out possibilities. Also, I was able to generalize the PRIMARY and SECONDARY patterns only after I had considered a large number of sentences. Thus, Holt's point is well illustrated: by delaying my attempt to reach a rational answer, by collecting enough data, I reached the point where certain rational conclusions were possible.

But there is a more crucial point. Anyone who looks at all the data will, I feel, be convinced that there is a single meaning for break, a meaning which is demonstrated most forcefully in the high metaphoric power of this and other common verbs. Yet, this meaning can not be defined or even understood by rational means. Unconsciously, we know what it means and can use it in many ways; but all our conscious attempts to define it are only distortions.

What are the teaching implications of this? If the meaning of break is unconscious, then to teach it we must stress even more strongly than we do now the PARADIGMATIC dimension of language. We can not TELL the student what break means; we can only SHOW him, let his unconscious see all the possibilities. Of course, he knows the possibilities in his own language, but he does not in the new language. If we teach break and its corresponding terms in other languages only in its concrete sense, then we obscure the generality of meaning behind it. As we all know, words in

different languages may correspond in concrete senses but differ in abstract senses. Since common verbs are heavily used, we would best serve the student if we showed him immediately the full range of verbs in both the new language and his own. When we give many examples, we help the unconscious to work; and out of its generalizing power comes the ability to be creative, to cope with many new and particular situations. And that is the best measure of successful teaching.

THE VERB BREAK

Primary

ice	cream	filibuster	logjam	monopoly
glass	shore	quarantine	restraint	relations
stone	meadow	jinx	constraint	faith
wood	country	drought	resistance	connection
fingernail	roof	heat wave	shackles	contract
egg	lane	weather	armor	marriage
plate	light	momentum	barrier	harmony
shell	darkness	rhythm	boundary	pattern
toy	sound	fall	bounds	formation
hammer	silence	line	record	ranks
sling	stillness	circle	agreement	habit
zipper	seclusion	ring	word	framework
string	fever	cycle	treaty	system
thread	vision	chain	promise	routine
rope	mood	link	oath	code
stem	grief	ties	accord	norm
vein	tension	bond	compact	personality
blister	loneliness	hold	contract	spirit
scab	monotony	stalemate	engagement	will
cloud	peace	yoke	convention	heart
frost	joy	dike	taboo	person
sod	fast	grip	rule	morale
bubble	spell	lock	order	composure
wave	curse	mold	law	confidence
mist	slump	bottleneck	regulation	concentration
oil	blackout	impasse	consensus	resolve
			cartel	conscience
			tradition	patience
			strike	control
			cover-up	strength
			camp	institution
			myth	isolation
			unity	position

Primary Contexts

__into	__apart
__in	__open
__up (into)	__off
__down (into)	

Secondary

story	day	trouble	trail
program	sun	epidemic	hole
scandal	light	storm	passageway
news	realization	war	sweat

Secondary Contexts

__through	__off (of/from)
__forth	__out (of/from)
__back	__free (of/from)
__from	__clear (of/from)
__into	__away (from)
__in	__loose (from)
__to	__on

TABLE ONE